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Ethnographers Imperial: Anthropology and British Rule in India

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RESEARCH IN PROGRESSI. ETHNOGRAPHERS IMPERIAL: ANTHROPOLOGY
AND BRITISH RULE IN INDIACharles Morrison
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[The following condensation of a longer research proposal is printed here with an eye to encouraging comment; Dr. Morrison plans to initiate the research on an SSRC grant in England this summer. G.W.S.]

District officers of the Raj were frequently required to produce detailed reports on social, cultural, and political conditions of a kind nowadays the province of academic specialists in the social sciences. Much of this administrative reporting was theoretically unsophisticated; but much of it reflects at least some familiarity with the intellectual traditions of the social sciences as they existed at the time, and Marx, Weber, Spencer, and Durkheim all made use of the reports on castes, tribes, and Indian social customs that British administrators produced so copiously. But what ethnological information did colonial servants perceive as relevant to their work? How did their personal and official interests affect the collection and presentation of that information? Especially, how did the imperial enterprise of ethnography connect with the academic enterprise of anthropology in centers of learning in Britain during the first half of this century? To the extent that the latter relationship has been studied previously, the flow of influence has been regarded as predominantly one-directional, outward to empire, rather than reciprocal; and although the racist implication of anthropology's relationship with colonial rule has been the subject of much polemic since the 1960s, the institutional contexts of the relationship and the ways changing colonial and academic policies affected each other in the study of Indian society during the Raj have not been much examined. . . .

One hypothesis to be tested in this research is the idea that during the last fifty years of British rule in India, ethnological information occupied a different and more ambiguous place in district and provincial administrations than it had in the nineteenth century. Such information was always of some bureaucratic concern; but by the 1920s, much of its compilation had become routine; its use was increasingly remote from what B. S. Cohn has argued was the original nineteenth century one of symbolically strengthening the legitimacy of British rule through an elaborate categorization of native subjects. In the eyes of the majority of twentieth century district administrators, the Victorian forerunners had done the ethnographic work so thoroughly that little more than an occasional updating of figures seemed necessary. The problem of why the job has been done so thoroughly in the first place continues to invite academic explanation: was it that the training and outlook of Victorian civil servants predisposed them to the collection of such material; or did the issues and policies of nineteenth century administration themselves necessitate its collection; or was it simply that native recruitment to the lower echelons so facilitated these undertakings as to engender them under some variant of Parkinson's law? Whatever the reasons, the best imperial ethnography in the nineteenth century seems to have been

done as a central part of routine administration. In the twentieth century, the ethnographic enterprise was often an individualistic one, carried out on the margins of administration; the ever tiny minority of district officers who were intellectually disposed to inquire into native customs sought rather different literary forms for the expression of these interests.

In part, the change reflected the burgeoning professionalization of anthropology in the centers of learning at home where the administrators had been trained and where some anthropological ideas were gaining a small measure of popular currency; paradoxically, this new academic outlook encouraged individualistic investigation and a holistic viewpoint. In part, the change reflected the increasingly strident demands of Indian nationalism. The older imperial ethnography had been the product of great self-assurance on the part of the colonial power. The doubts about the permanence of British rule that nationalism raised in the minds of many younger administrators undermined the assumptions of the nineteenth century ethnographers. Was there a decline in the quality of imperial ethnography? If so, was this an aspect of the decline in orientalism or the product of other factors, academic as well as administrative? Research by students of Anglo-Indian literature and British colonial policy charting the changing nature of British attitudes of India has shown an oscillation between faith and doubt concerning the development of Indian society. The role of scholarly ideas in this oscillation is well known for the late nineteenth century, but less well studied for the twentieth century, especially the role of ethnological ideas. For example, Cohn has suggested there was a shift in the 1930s and the 1940s in the ethnographic focus of imperial ethnography--from villages to the tribes. The point is of some comparative interest in the history of anthropology: at about that time, American ethnology was beginning to make the opposite shift.

Two new varieties of imperial ethnography emerged in the twentieth century. Neither of these was strictly speaking official, although often produced by officials, but analysis of their development can be linked readily, I believe, to the oscillations mentioned above. One of the two varieties (e.g., the work of M. Darling, P. Moon, P. Mason) involved journalistic, literary, fictional, or autobiographic accounts of Indian society, often mildly critical of the regime of the colonial power. The second genre was the final link between anthropology and imperial administration in India and was anthropological in a strictly professional sense. Towards the end of the Raj, a few officials had either obtained formal training in anthropology or had produced formal studies that enabled them to pass easily into professional circles in England. The ethnographies of Archer, Heimendorf, Hutton, Mills, Stevenson, and a few others compare reasonably well with the work of Radcliffe-Brown on the Andaman Islands and Rivers among the Toda.